



EXECUTIVE COMPUTING

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File-handling documentation simple, easy

It has an awkward name, but when it comes to recommending a simple data base or file-handling software program, I usually pick pfs:File. In an area that's fraught with complicated programs and hard-to-understand instruction manuals, this gem — combined with its companion pfs:Report — is exceptionally easy to learn and use.

This ease of use is important, because unlike Lotus 1-2-3 or other "spreadsheet" programs that are used only when you have some financial work at hand, a good file-handling program will beg you to use it every day. You'll find yourself using it for almost anything that involves lists, parts and mailing labels, as will almost anyone in your office who can read and barely type.

At this point, you're probably thinking, "Sure, *he* thinks it's easy. But has he read any software documentation lately?" Honestly, the documentation is the simplest and easiest to understand of any program I've ever seen. You'll outgrow your need for the instructions quickly. No classes, individualized instruction, hand-holding or psychological counseling.

No bugs

Pfs:File is a simple program for situations where you don't want to involve a programmer or outside expert. The best way to learn to use it simply is sitting down in front of your PC with the program and its manual. Because it's been around several years and several hundred thousand copies have been sold, the program works exactly as it is supposed to with no bugs — a comforting thought. That doesn't mean there aren't some drawbacks, which I'll discuss a little later.

Like 1-2-3, pfs:File is "self-documenting." An employee's work can be reviewed simply by looking at files. Flip through the screen formats, and all the design work is obvious; look

at the records, such as customer names, and you can see whether the data has been entered carefully. Furthermore, since it is easy to change the format of a file, and add or delete fields of data later on, you can let your subordinates take the first crack at it.

Pulling strings

Some people hesitate to buy a file-handling program because they figure it's more work to put a bunch of records into a computer than to deal with their cumbersome paper files. But here's a feature you don't get with paper files, and one that any experienced computer user will appreciate.

Say you're looking for people in your data file who work in a particular job function. With pfs:File, you can look for a string of characters even if it does not start at the beginning of a field. By specifying "... sales ..." in the job title field it will search for the word "sales" anywhere in that field, not just the first word. Even on many more advanced and more expensive data base systems, you can't find this.

Here are some other ways you can do searches:

- ✓ /sales — enter this, and you get records that do not equal "sales."

- ✓ /..sales.. — you get records that do not have "sales" anywhere within the field.

- ✓ /.. — you get records with no information entered in the field.

- ✓ John@n — this is the so-called "wild card" search; the @ can be any character, meaning you'll pull up "Johnson" as well as "Johnsen."

The drawbacks

As I mentioned, there are shortcomings.

First, it clearly is a nuisance to have two separate programs, pfs:File and pfs:Report, on two separate disks, purchased separately. Each costs about \$140. It was probably a good marketing and revenue-producing decision for dealers, but it is a waste of time and energy for the rest of us.

Next, for users with a one- or two-disk drive personal computer, the file size is limited by the number of records that fit on one floppy diskette. Depending on the size of each record, this can be as small as 1,000 records. More advanced data base programs allow fields to be continued on other disks.

Also, there's no advanced version of pfs:File, and thus no upward migration is provided by the developer, Software Publishing Corp. When your needs outgrow pfs:File, you must jump to another, incompatible program, such as dBase III from Ashton-Tate or RBase 4000 from Microrim. (dBase III lists for \$695 at Denver-area retail computer stores, RBase 4000 for \$495.)

But in my opinion, these are minor hurdles — especially when the alternative offered by other programs is so often a labyrinth of complex manuals and incomprehensible operating procedures. In fact, once you latch onto a file-handling program that's easy to use and understand, you may find the biggest problem is you'll want a computer near your desk whenever you're in the office.

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